

Indigenous Knowledge in Negotiating Sustainable Natural Resource Management

Urs Wiesmann (Geography), University of Bern (Switzerland)

It can be argued that the concept of sustainable development is bound to valuation, negotiation and contextuality. Against this background, sustainability approaches have to embrace system, target and transformation knowledge, as well as endogenous and exogenous perspectives in transdisciplinary processes. This basically also applies to the concept of sustainable natural resource management as one sub-component of sustainable development. In order to conceptualize relevant knowledge systems in natural resource management it is proposed to differentiate between specific and globalized natural potential, representing indigenous and exogenous perspectives and knowledge systems.

The practical implications of these theoretical considerations for research and development are illustrated in three cases from Kenya. (1) In semi-arid Makueni long-term established indigenous knowledge comprises a wealth of indicators relevant to climate variability, change, and adaptation. (2) In the highland-lowland systems of Mount Kenya massive migration from high-potential to low-potential area poses major challenges of adapting indigenous knowledge to the new environment through social learning and negotiation processes. (3) In the politically highly contested region of the Mau forest indigenous knowledge represented in ancestor territories of the Ogiek people is highly valuable but overshadowed by conflicts with other ethnic groups and interests. The significant differences between the three cases point to the range of roles indigenous knowledge can practically play in negotiating sustainable natural resource management and enable to draw conclusions on contextualized approaches.